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# Making sense, discovering what works... Cross-agency collaboration in Child Welfare and Protection in Norway and Quebec

by

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**Keywords:**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the enabling and constraining factors that underpin inter-organizational collaboration in Child Welfare and Protection services in Norway and Quebec. Characterized by different regulatory systems, but with a common drive to hierarchically promote cross-agency collaboration, these jurisdictions provide the basis for two instructive and contrasting case studies on the subject. The paper builds on meta-ethnography as a means to synthesize and translate results from separate qualitative research undertakings carried out in each place. It argues that although a core set of properties may be identified as necessary for collaboratives to operate in a successful, sustainable manner; greater attention should be paid to how these properties interact with one another on the ground, given schemes' particular scope and scale of objectives. Moreover, regulatory provisions aimed at stimulating or mandating cross-agency networks may align with collaborative capacity in various ways, occasionally in a mutually reinforcing, but sometimes antagonistic manner. The conclusions drawn have implications for both research and policy.

## **Keywords**

cross-agency collaboration, service networks, Child Welfare and Protection, sociology, Norway and Quebec, meta-ethnography

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the proliferation in most advanced welfare states of local cross-agency collaboratives or service networks has spawned an extensive literature at both the policy and practical implementation levels (for recent reviews, see O'Leary & Vij, 2012; Provan & Lemaire, 2012; O'Toole, 2015). A wide range of issues has been covered on the subject; yet, in seeking to understand collaboration dynamics in social services, a research concern of enduring significance –and in many respects an unresolved question remains: *Given specific policy and institutional environments, what strategies seem to work best in facilitating collaborative endeavours?*

Addressing this concern is more so relevant given that stimulating, and sometimes mandating cross-agency collaboration among a wide array of stakeholders, frequently represents a challenging task for policy advocates and practitioners alike (Bryson et al., 2015). On the frontlines, some suggest that a number of such initiatives are faltering and seem unable to generate tangible results. Indeed, while operating-related challenges abound, 'collaborative inertia' is not an uncommon feature of many networks (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). But successful experiences have also been singled out, and may show the way forward (Robson, 2012). Some have also expressed the view that 'properly resourced and supported, a mandated network can be an essential, effective policy catalyst to address compelling public policy issues' (Popp & Casabeer, 2015: 5). Be that as it may, questions have been raised in various jurisdictions on both sides of the Atlantic over whether service networks can be steered (i.e. regulated) in a given direction, led to generate a degree of collaboration among participants and ultimately perform in a synergistic, effective manner (Sorensen & Torfing, 2009). The 'goodness of fit' between regulatory provisions from a given jurisdiction and stakeholder collaborative dynamics is another subject where knowledge is still fragmented and debated (Voets et al., 2015).

This paper presents results from a meta-ethnographic, comparative analysis of findings (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Britten & Pope, 2012) on the enabling and constraining factors that underpin inter-organizational collaboration in Child Welfare and Protection Services (CWP) in Norway and Quebec. Its core research question aims at establishing whether recurrent collaboration problems in service networks primarily stem from existing regulatory provisions or from endemic, stakeholder interactional dynamics, despite variations in institutional service configurations. Such knowledge is relevant for the setting up and facilitation of cross-agency collaboration, including further research on the subject.<sup>1</sup>

Following the introduction, we alternately review the literature on the subject, define the paper's conceptual and methodological criteria and introduce background information on networks' operating conditions in each jurisdiction. Next, empirical data on barriers and facilitators to cross-agency collaboration in CWP from Quebec and Norway are presented (i.e. MAKING SENSE OF NETWORKING ACTIVITY ON THE GROUND). The following sections (under the heading REGULATORY PROVISIONS AND CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION DYNAMICS) provide a comparative synthesis of findings, and make inferences on how regulatory provisions on cross-agency networks from each jurisdiction interact with- and affect collaborative endeavours on the ground. The conclusion sums up study findings and elaborates on their significance for research and policy on the subject.

## **CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION: BACKGROUND AND KNOWLEDGE STATUS**

Collaboration and networking have become ubiquitous in discussions of welfare reform internationally, especially given the potential benefits in innovative practices and economies of scale (Popp et al., 2014). In both Norway and Quebec, cross-agency networks have flourished at the local level and come to enjoy broad support in decision-making and professional circles. Over the last decade, in particu-

lar, governments have encouraged, and sometimes mandated, a range of collaborative schemes in welfare provision (Breimo et al., 2016), often involving various private actors.

Despite nuances in both contexts, networks can be defined as arrangements whereby various stakeholders engage in a collaboration that is formalized, consensus-oriented and deliberative, and which aims to manage or deliver human services under public oversight (Ansell & Gash, 2007).<sup>2</sup> However, in Norway as in Quebec, network schemes are embedded in distinctive welfare regimes or 'worlds of welfare services' (Stoy, 2014) modeling their configuration and operation mode.

Although research on collaboratives has advanced significantly (Popp et al., 2014), most studies have only marginally delved into the wider regulatory aspects governing such initiatives (Morris & Miller-Stevens, 2015; Saz-Carranza et al., 2015), and very few have explored the subject from an international, comparative perspective (Klijn, 2008). Available evidence suggests that regulatory frameworks play a significant role in shaping networks' functioning (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; O'Leary & Vij, 2012; Raab et al., 2015). For instance, Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) point out that 'normative environments for collaboration' both frame stakeholders' 'logics of appropriate behaviour' and strongly influence schemes' contours. A parallel research stream has looked at how government can promote, steer or even mandate collaborative ventures (Voets et al., 2015). Tackling the subject, Willem and Lucidarme (2014) underscore that although enforced network initiatives abound, mutual trust seems difficult to forge, and sustainability remains contentious (Rodriguez et al. 2007). Nevertheless, Ferlie et al. (2009) maintain that mandated networks built on pre-existing schemes may turn into hybrid collaboration forms, with enforcement not being the only dynamic at work. Furthermore, Popp and Casbeer (2015) state that while 'collaboration by its very nature is impossible to mandate', hierarchically defined networks may function well if certain conditions are met, including a degree of 'distributed leadership'. In this regard, some argue

that 'leadership without ownership can be the driving force behind the success of a network' (MacKean et al., 2015:12).

Although valuable insights can be inferred from this body of research, a fine-grained understanding of how a given government 'network agenda' is understood and accomplished by various relevant stakeholders is lacking. In particular, the role of institutional regulation in generating incentives or hindrances for cross-agency collaboration – best assessed by international comparisons – remains unclear.

### **CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

Why these two cases for comparison? Norway and Quebec exhibit commonalities in relation to an interventionist government in welfare service delivery, but also substantial differences in CWP service architectures and the regulatory provisions framing cross-agency collaboration. More specifically, public involvement in Norway is comprehensive, and municipalities are expected to take a strong responsibility for service provision, often with rather wide mandates. On the other hand, Quebec has a long history of cross-sector management in human services and a well-rooted *économie sociale* that is lacking in the former. Visions and expectations regarding collaboration in CWP also differ (see below), thus providing the basis for two instructive and contrasting cases for study on the interface between regulation and organizational network dynamics.

Regarding analytical approach, the paper builds on meta-ethnography (Britten & Pope, 2012; Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Lee, 2014) as a means to synthesize results from separate research undertakings carried out in Norway and Quebec. A widely applied method for cross-study analysis, meta-ethnography seeks to extract and articulate findings from different sources 'to arrive at an interpretation that is greater than that offered by the individual studies making up its constituent parts' (Britten & Pope, 2012: 41). Accordingly, a step-by-step process was followed to facilitate the integration of findings from distinct studies (as conceived by Noblit &

Hare, 1988) and, in so doing, engage in the ‘reciprocal translations of their meanings’ – the process is described below. Concerning *Norway*, data were derived from the project, *Collaboration as innovation in Public Welfare Services*, carried out in 2013-2014, which aimed at charting service paths for youth transitioning from CWP to adult services (Breimo et al., 2015). More specifically, the project investigated what happens in the Norwegian welfare bureaucracy when young people turn 18, especially as regards service continuity and the interface between various support systems. Data collection was undertaken through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young adults, as well as service workers from municipal CWP and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The latter is a large state agency set-up in 2005 as a result of the Norwegian Employment Agency and the National Insurance Scheme having merged into a single administration, a reform which, inter alia, included the signing of a formal collaboration agreement between various government social services agencies at the local level. It is interviews with service workers and senior management (n=10) in a relatively large city (190,000 inh.) that constitute the prime data source for this analysis. The networks investigated were sampled ‘inductively’ as they emerged in respondent interviews. In this city, authorities’ emphasis on collaboration has led to the facilitating of several inter-organizational joint-work initiatives. Concerning service architecture, municipal welfare is split between Child and Family, and Health and Welfare. Additionally, service delivery is decentralized into four districts. An agreement has been passed between the municipality and NAV, whereby all services are organized in compliance with the same decentralized structure. Moreover, a number of collaboratives were established, the most formalized example being the OSK teams (*Offentlige servicekontorer* in Norwegian) associating NAV with municipal Child-protection and Health and Welfare offices to deal with complex cases requiring multiple provider interventions. These networks are mandated, i.e. their establishment by local authorities is required. They are regulated through municipality-NAV agreements, although some discretion is provided for concerning the shape and mode of operation. Despite OSK teams’ aims, no formal decision-making structure was envisaged for binding all agencies together. Hence, although

intervention plans are jointly established, services are provided by each agency individually.

A more horizontal collaborative example is the Action teams, aimed at preventing school dropout. These teams are present and formalized in all the districts investigated, but operate on an *ad hoc* basis. Their composition is comparatively larger, designed to include the three public agencies mentioned above, high schools and various follow-up service providers – both public and private – with which links are more loosely defined. Most interviewees were either team members or senior management responsible for teams' setting up and oversight.

As regards Quebec, an analysis was conducted by relying on collaborative initiatives investigated by the *Quebec observatory of local service networks* (OQRLS) (Archambault & Nadeau, 2012; Deshaies & Pollender, 2014). Out of 62 networks documented by the OQRLS, four of them dealing with CWP were purposefully selected for their relevancy to the study at hand, and re-examined by centring on facilitating and hindering collaborative factors.<sup>3</sup> OQRLS data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with a convenience sample of stakeholders, a general network information form completed by a key sponsor, and relevant network documentation. A core interview section dealt with the networks operating over time, the challenges encountered and the optimal conditions for their success. All four initiatives emerged in the 2005-2009 period, in the context of reforms mandating local networks, as well as policy geared at enhancing service continuity between the (separate) *protection* and *social support* service streams in this domain. The selected networks were located in rural (n=2), semi-rural (n=1) and urban (n=1) areas, which tend to differ in terms of social service availability, collaborative dynamics and the issues at stake. Despite their differences, all the initiatives aimed at improving *preventive interventions*, whether for young children with complex problems, youth at risk of suicide, socio-economic disadvantaged children, or troubled youth likely to be referred to Youth Protection. Furthermore, all the initiatives concerned the setting up of *new services*, whereby agency collaboration was at its



core. As regards size and composition, all four initiatives were relatively small, directly involving a limited number of partners (four to eight) from the public and not-profit sectors. However, referrals were often made to various local or regional organizations interfacing with the network initiative, albeit not formally enrolled with it.

Building on meta-ethnography, seven steps were pursued to reconcile and interpret findings from these studies (see Box 1).

**Box 1: Meta-ethnography's analytical steps**

1. Getting started
2. Assessing what is relevant to the initial interest
3. Reading the studies
4. Establishing a common analytical grid
5. Performing thematic coding
6. Translating the studies into one another
7. Expressing the synthesis

Source: Adapted from Noblit & Hare (1988).

Step 1 consisted of getting started by *overviewing* the extent of available data and general findings from both studies related to the setting up and operating conditions of networks. Step 2 aimed at *assessing the relevancy of data* to the study objectives, and at clarifying the scope of the synthesis. Steps 3 and 4 entailed *carefully reading* each study to identify potentially relevant data and concepts, and establishing a common analytical grid. Step 5 encompassed performing the same *thematic coding* across studies. On the basis of this coding, step 6 involved the *interpretive translating* of findings according to thematic categories (i.e. second-order interpretation). Step 7 consisted of *synthesizing* and further analysing the meaning and implication of findings within- and across jurisdictions (i.e. third-order interpretation).<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the common analytical grid in particular, five sets of variables or *constructs* were included: Governance and power relations, Mutuality and trust, Resource management issues, Organizational culture and Leadership. These constructs cover structural, social capital and agency dimensions prominent in the literature on network functioning. They loosely draw on the *Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory* developed by Mattessich et al. (2001) to assess factors influencing collaborative success, as well as Thomson and Perry's (2006) multidimensional framework.<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding the analytical rigour offered by meta-ethnography, several caveats should be borne in mind. Given primary studies' characteristics and objectives, the depth and breadth of available data concerning networks' operation varied. As a result, the equivalency and comparability of findings were sometimes difficult to establish. Most important, there are dangers at being conclusive when comparing a small sample of joint-work initiatives from two countries, a feature that qualifies any quick generalization about the CWP network hindering and facilitating factors. Be that as it may, the evidence underpinning this study allows for both a detailed appreciation of CWP cross-agency collaboration within a specific regulatory environment, and an accurate approximation of lessons to be drawn when comparing dynamics across contexts.

## **NETWORKS BACKGROUND AND OPERATING CONDITIONS**

All networks under study emerged in a jurisdiction-specific context (national and local), and are an expression of distinctive collaborative efforts, both of which affect their operating on the ground. Regarding *Norway*, the need for cross-agency and professional collaboration has been a recurring political theme for decades (Breimo & Sandvin, 2009). As before, the main goal now is to strengthen actors' cooperation in service delivery, thereby making interventions more holistic and tailor-made to users (Normann et al., 2013). However, despite increasing collabora-

tion demands, Norwegian CWP remains a fairly closed and self-reliant sector (Baklien, 2009). This is the case, even when CWP appears to be the welfare domain in which private provider use is most common (Backe-Hansen et al., 2013).

Significantly, public-private CWP provider relations are normally contractual and limited in nature. While private agencies offer foster homes and institutional care, which are approved and monitored by government, most collaboration encompassing private parties relates to preventive services and the following up of young-adults discharged from institutions. Noteworthy, CWP services have recently been the subject of media negative attention, one complaint being that collaboration across welfare agencies is often poor. For its part, government has emphasized that the problem is the current municipal-state sharing of responsibilities, which supports joint-work *among* CWP public agencies rather than *across* sectors, including private providers.

Another organizational issue is the strict separation between child and adult services, causing a complete change of care regime when children turn 18 (Breimo et al., 2013). However, in principle at least, children in the custody of CWP authorities are entitled to services until the age of 23, that which offers a scope of opportunities and conditions for service cooperation. CWP agencies can mobilize a wide range of potential allies when it comes to securing the difficult transition to adulthood, including the sharing of resources. On the other hand, adult welfare services may find CWP collaboration advantageous in order to minimize later problems. It is precisely this need for closer collaboration which motivated the set-up of the OSK- and Action teams.

The situation in *Quebec* is also unique in many respects, all while sharing some commonalities with Norway. One initial aspect to consider, having influenced collaboration initiatives' unfolding over time, is government's traditional reliance on an interventionist, *dirigiste* perspective to social services' steering and delivery (Vailancourt, 2012). Despite greater outsourcing to third-sector providers, a large-scale

contracting out has never gained much traction in the province. Instead, the concepts of 'partnering' and 'cross-sector action' have regularly been mobilized to characterize public-private relations and the sharing of service responsibilities. Since the early 2000s in particular, various public facilities were merged into broad Health and Social Services Centres (CSSS). Entrusted with a degree of decision-making power, these Centres were intended as key orchestrators of public-private provider relations, including the setting up of local collaboratives (Demers, 2013).

Inter-agency collaboration was originally thought of as a bottom-up process, based on a voluntary rather than constrained endeavour, even when promoted by local or regional government agencies. In the 1990s, however, there was a shift toward 'managed collaboration', as regional coordination plans were advocated by government. Support for a top-down 'integrated' system of care was fueled by positive results from several experimental initiatives carried out in the province during the 2000s (Demers, 2013). Over time, the combination of various initiatives and reforms would cause two collaboration approaches to coexist, one increasingly hierarchical and constraining – materialized by the CSSS and their mandate to establish networks in most social service domains – and another more consensual and enabling, typified by a set of voluntary arrangements (Breimo et al., 2016).

## **MAKING SENSE OF NETWORKING ACTIVITY ON THE GROUND**

In seeking to 'translate' study findings into one another (i.e. second-order analysis), the following sub-sections provide data on factors influencing collaborative endeavours in CWP services in Quebec and Norway. Data are reinterpreted in accordance with the five themes or constructs singled out in the methodology section, with Table 1 summarizing findings from the analysis contained in these sub-sections:

TABLE 1: Key constructs and related features affecting cross-agency collaboration in Quebec and Norway

Governance and power relations	Mutuality and trust	Resources	Organizational culture	Leadership
<b>Quebec</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pivotal local government agency</li> <li>• Multi-stakeholder steering committees</li> <li>• Clinical interdisciplinary teams</li> <li>• Collegial decision-making</li> <li>• Multilateral service agreements</li> <li>• Limited government oversight provisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past multi-stakeholder familiarity</li> <li>• Trust building through transitional activities</li> <li>• Emphasis on team members' equality</li> <li>• Emphasis on collective rather than individual-agency goals</li> <li>• Stakeholder involvement for similar, user-centred reasons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little emphasis on economic return</li> <li>• Financing through multiple, alternative sources</li> <li>• Members' reallocation of available resources</li> <li>• Resource management through creative problem solving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easing of cultural gaps through project/formulating process</li> <li>• Intervention philosophy used as rallying principle</li> <li>• Development of a collaborative common vision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared leadership</li> <li>• Strong management commitment to collaborative leadership as a source of internal and external legitimacy</li> </ul>
<b>Norway</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equal public parties</li> <li>• Mixed-level public administration</li> <li>• Formal collaboration agreements</li> <li>• Represented by middle management</li> <li>• Delegated authority</li> <li>• Collegial management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic confidence by virtue of legal status</li> <li>• Culturally based myths held on one another</li> <li>• Trust-building through deliberation</li> <li>• Emphasis on equality and common challenges</li> <li>• Emphasis on creative solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little emphasis on cost reduction</li> <li>• Emphasis on technological resources</li> <li>• Negotiations about limits to responsibility</li> <li>• Emphasis on added value</li> <li>• Negotiated cost sharing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acting within a formal-legal cultural frame of public responsibility</li> <li>• Little emphasis on eradicating cultural differences</li> <li>• Emphasis on communication and forging a common vision</li> <li>• Development of collegial community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little emphasis on leadership</li> <li>• Collegial management</li> <li>• Still, informal leadership matters</li> </ul>

### **Network governance dynamics and power brokering**

Our evidence on either jurisdiction underscores the critical role governance dynamics play in shaping CWP collaborative arrangements. Regarding *Quebec, processes leading to the initiatives' creation* were dissimilar; three of them were steered by a CSSS, while a fourth emerged in a rather serendipitous manner, through a multi-agency negotiated approach. Whenever networks resulted from a CSSS *clinical project* – hence, in line with the mandated networks reforms – schemes were viewed as a mechanism for services' co-production, with a range of local actors entrusted with 'the exercise of a population-based responsibility'. The focus was therefore on articulating providers' mandates and resources in a more effective manner, and around a particular set of interventions. By contrast, networks in two initiatives had a more clinical and professional bent, inspired by a CWP intervention approach that had proven successful elsewhere.

That said, all networks developed *various managing mechanisms*. For instance, in all cases a steering committee, made up of management from participating organizations, pilots the network. However, a government agency plays a pivotal role in three of them. Some initiatives are also affiliated with a local *round table* comprising a larger number of stakeholders, which fulfils a strategic, advisory role. Additionally, in three initiatives a team of practitioners was set up as a means of providing and coordinating clinical interventions on the ground.

*Governance mechanisms evolved* over time. For example, in certain cases a transitional working group was created at the outset to conceptualize the initiative and enrol relevant stakeholders. A common linkage strategy used by public agencies consisted of reaching out to partners and finding a mechanism to distribute responsibilities – seen by members as a way of 'instilling a sense of shared leadership' to the still-emerging collaborative.

In three initiatives, formal *service agreements* involving all concerned parties were also established. Agreements delineated goals, responsibilities and service paths,

in addition to also serving to stimulate members' meeting of the minds and to standardize expectations.

*Power imbalances* were not an explicit concern, even when some respondents stated 'the need to work towards a more equal distribution of tasks and roles (CSSS director-general)' as the basis for enhancing collaboration. All the same, shared management (i.e. power) arrangements were worked out in all initiatives. Significantly, in at least two cases, interdisciplinary teams were set up within a community organization, a decision partly aimed at defusing non-profits' concerns about a loss of organizational identity or being manipulated for other objectionable purposes.

If we now focus on governance mechanisms in *Norway*, an agreement on-, and not least, compliance with basic parameters and the 'rules of the game' seem vital to networks' smooth operation. *Important norms* underpinning collaboration seem to be fairness and a commitment to 'genuine cooperation'. And when participants get a feeling that initiatives begin to 'lose steam and stall', the guiding compass of cooperation may falter.

The OSK teams investigated, which encompass two municipal agencies and the state-run NAV, have succeeded differently in achieving an effective cooperation. There are several reasons for this, not least that stakeholders' degree of trust varied across initiatives (see the following section). But to some extent, trustworthy relations are reflective of differences in how participants' *cooperation behaviour was shaped by regulation*. In this respect, participants' assigned mandates may play a significant role. Regarding NAV, central management tends to decide on the cases to be prioritized, which in some offices get precedence over a common local agenda.

But *power-related variables* (i.e. resources, prestige and expertise) also prove to be central to networking. NAV, for instance, commands many resources, which

together with status-related prestige, entrusts the agency with significant decision-making authority. Nevertheless, in large measure, power is a relational feature tied to the control someone exerts over something others may have an interest in. For example, a network is comparatively more important to municipalities (who have a wider remittance) than to agencies such as NAV. This unequal power balance is noticeable in all OSK teams.

Stakeholders' *resistance to mandated* collaboration is sometimes present as well. In formalized schemes such as OSK teams, this manifests itself through a dutiful, yet sometimes disinterested participation if not verbal opposition – which is dependent, it seems, on the extent to which collaboration is promoted by higher authorities.

### **Building mutuality despite differences and fostering close relations**

Mutuality and trust were critical and vital ingredients for successful collaboration in either jurisdiction. In the case of *Quebec*, the establishing of service links was not new or contrived, even when initiatives responded to a *public mandate*. Practitioners were normally quite familiar with one another, owing to service referrals or their association with specific local activities. And this *familiarity* also played a crucial trust-building role. As reported by one respondent: 'Before arriving with a project like this, cooperative relations should be already underway. You do not establish a trusting relationship in the context of a new project; you establish a new project in a relationship that already exists (CSSS practitioner).' Likewise, a manager stated: 'Our complicity, our previous collaboration, our credibility were already established and mutually recognized (CSSS deputy-director).'

The importance of *trustworthy relations as a prerequisite* for the establishing of effective collaboration is somewhat at odds with the hierarchical nature of recent policy directives on networks. For public providers entrusted with a mandate to set up networks, translating these directives into workable action entails performing a delicate balancing act. As put by one CSSS manager: 'The term *collaboration* is a



much vaunted part of our mission as a service provider. But working well with partners requires we don't push our views on others. It means making the best out of it for everyone. Sometimes a network sponsor [such as a CSSS] must be ready and willing to make difficult compromises.'

Different venues were used to *foster closer relations* and reinforce trust. For example, transitional working groups, set up to define the initiative's main parameters, stakeholders' consultations or an affiliation with a local round table, provided a unique opportunity for partners to bring each other's expectations into line. In any event, *infusing a sense of mutuality* was commonly viewed as an indispensable ingredient. Furthermore, one of the challenges regarding mutuality was members' willingness to *forego their own interests* at the expense of goals established in the collaborative: 'Transparent interaction between members is paramount. [Participants should] avoid "pulling the cover" in their direction... Collective goals should be placed before their organizational or personal ones (CSSS practitioner).'

As far as *Norway* is concerned, interviewees tell about *personal relations being developed through participation* in networks. An important factor seems to be the knowledge obtained about other parties, which may serve to supersede biased perceptions and prejudice. One interviewee talks about how such mutual understanding and the personal relations established through formal networks also contribute to help enhance the informal cooperation between the parties (Child-protection, OSK team member).

Nevertheless, the interviews also contain stories about suspicion and distrust. It even seems as though *trust and distrust sometimes coexist* in a given network; both mutual understanding and suspicion may be present, shifting depending on the situation or between different constellations of actors. It would also appear that some partners are considered either more trustworthy than others or, to the contrary, always viewed with some suspicion. Municipal actors are generally more

suspicious of state agencies than other municipal counterparts, and NAV (state) is generally regarded with a degree suspicion by municipal partners.

*Struggles over resources* seem more prevalent among municipal partners than between municipalities and the state. But NAV is a powerful agency whose agenda is defined in a hierarchical manner. Even when local NAV offices participate in networks, they are primarily accountable to their own 'primas'. There is a general feeling among municipal interviewees that NAV primarily seeks to protect its own interests. At the same time, responsibilities often overlap, and NAV commands many resources that municipal agencies can only access through cooperation. These dynamics illustrate the potential for local collaboration; however, they also point at power imbalances, sometimes turning *mutuality into an ambivalent endeavour*.

This leads to another aspect of mutuality that emerges from the analysis of networking initiatives in Norway, namely, the fact that partners are bound together not always (or only) through a sense of shared values and preferences but, interestingly enough, *also through complementary differences*. As put by one Child-protection interviewee working for an OSK team: What happens, she says, is that 'We learn about the possibilities that exist within other sectors that we didn't know about. It means that opportunities expand greatly.' And such 'possibility room' means everyone could benefit from a larger set of working instruments. In addition, since responsibilities often overlap, self-interest becomes difficult to distinguish from a collective willingness to improve the lives of users. Hence, mutuality rests on the potential for collective goal achievement and the fact that individual partner's success benefits everyone.

It therefore appears that, at least within a Norwegian public service context, self-interest is not incompatible with mutuality. Rather, what is observed is a development whereby self-interest is often tacitly accepted, that which turns collaboration into *a generic activity*, as opposed to one requiring a degree of organization. A

NAV, OSK team member characterizes the team as a 'great opportunity for case-managers working alone with difficult cases to address them with professional managers from different fields, with different competences and loads of experience.' The problem, however, is that 'It is very difficult to get people to use it.' Although mutuality and self-interest are not necessarily inimical principles, a lack of mutuality and trust may prevent collaboration processes from becoming established.

### **Securing financing and other management resources**

Concerning resources, a constraint on network development highlighted in Quebec is the fact that the money needed to implement such government-inspired initiatives was never provided for. Not surprisingly, in all networks under review, various financial streams had to be tapped to support their establishment and long-term operation. Sometimes, partial financial support was secured through an accessory Ministry assistance programme; in others, ad-hoc financing was obtained from a regional government body, whereas in others a fund-raising programme was used. Nevertheless, multiple source financing was the norm.

Also, despite a *new* service being created, interdisciplinary teams were normally formed by reassigning professionals from a member organization. Lastly, professional training sessions, offices and equipment were provided free of cost by member organizations.

In any event, *creative problem solving* was generally needed to pull together all the necessary resources. Financial shortcomings often led to delays in the networks' start or inability to adequately respond to service demands. However, whereas some saw funding shortages as 'the project's Achilles heel' and a source of concern, others seemed no longer concerned. As stated by a Child-protection manager: 'Usually collaborations with community organizations do not last very long. But in the case of this project, the partnership has already lasted since 2002. Common budgets have gone up steadily, and partner interactions have improved

over time. We've already received several partnership awards.' Still, others considered that, 'Management commitment is paramount and comes before financial security (Community organization practitioner).'

As in Quebec, networking endeavours in *Norway* have *seldom been endorsed by extra money*, something that several interviewees found quite unfortunate. Although network set-up did not require much more than participants' time, financing may represent an issue, especially so concerning young care leavers transferred from Child-protection to community-based services. One OSK team member from social services stated that sometimes 'young adults are sent over to us when they are 18 years and 10 minutes old. This leads to some tough bargaining processes. If we only had joined budgets, this could have all been avoided.' Furthermore, some interviewees questioned whether the time invested was worthwhile: 'Sometimes I look at the meeting agenda and decide there is not much for me to contribute in here, and there is no point in just sitting and listening (Health and social services, OSK team member).'

As mentioned above, NAV is a large organization controlling a sizable portion of public welfare expenditures. Its introduction was a valued government initiative, giving the agency a high degree of decision latitude, even concerning its own objectives – something other agencies are not capable of. Municipal interviewees stressed that NAV often focused on self-evaluated goals. One OSK-member (Health and social services) said that: 'NAV is only occupied with processing applications for grants and services, they do not use any resources on guidance and counseling.' She further regretted that these tasks, considered less 'countable' and outside official statistics, were often left to other team members.

In contrast, 'Action team' members reported few resources or management collaboration obstacles. One reason for this is probably their more ad-hoc and 'low threshold' way of networking. Fewer economic resources are at stake, and their decisions are of a more practical nature. As highlighted by a member: 'We don't

count numbers at these meetings; there is not much number counting (Child-protection, Action team member).’ When asked about the prevailing positive attitude toward these teams, a respondent pointed out that ‘Members are very engaged and really interested in making it work (NAV, Action team member).’ Another reported reason is a prevailing ‘good chemistry’ between members (Child-protection, Action team member). Also, the Action teams have a common target population, which is seen as an important factor holding collaborations together.

### **Navigating inter-organizational cultural and organizational distance**

To some *Quebec* respondents, *bridging organizational cultural differences*, particularly between public agencies and non-profits, was vital for getting the collaborative under way. In several initiatives, drawing practitioners out of their ‘comfort zones’ concerning intervention approaches, routines and attitudes appeared challenging. As stated by a CSSS practitioner: ‘In the beginning, it was a culture shock. Not only were we no longer working within our respective organizations and traditional mandates, but we were sitting across from each other, holding our own ideas, yet faced with situations as complex as they were before.’ Non-profits in particular feared an *organizational identity loss*: ‘Identity differences and confrontation of intervention perspectives were particularly challenging for stakeholders during the first year of implementation (Community organization director).’

However, to the extent networks took time to become operational, deeply-rooted differences in intervention perspectives, norms and expectations could generally get ironed out. In this respect, network intervention protocols, regular clinical supervision and steering committee meetings played a key role in helping to forge shared views. Interestingly, in some initiatives, endorsing a particular intervention philosophy beforehand seems to have served as a rallying point, providing members with a stronger base from which to build a collaborative.

Even in Norway, as we have seen, overcoming myths and prejudices that agencies might hold about one another is a precondition for developing a collaborative relationship. Differences with regard to legislation and governance structure can also be difficult to handle within a network setting. Some interviewees even point at differences in professional opinion as an occasional obstacle. Still, differences in experience and competence, and even in cultural patterns of thought, *are most often regarded as assets* for collaboration by Norwegian interviewees. This is probably because the networks under study differ from those in the Quebec sample, both regarding set-up and objectives, as they meet occasionally, though regularly, to deal with common-, cross-sector- and complex problems.

### **The legitimacy of network promoters and shared leadership**

As regards *Quebec*, multiple actors have normally been tasked with developing and managing network initiatives. Noteworthy, several projects have been *led by clinician-managers* – i.e. practitioners holding managerial responsibilities – who were able to draw on their expertise for setting the network up. This leadership conferred greater legitimacy to the initiative than if it had been brought about by managers less cognizant of realities on the ground. The centrality of clinician-managers was even more apparent for initiatives focusing on a particular intervention philosophy, whereby their credibility ensured stakeholders' buy-in at every stage of the process.

That said, however, several respondents emphasized the importance of a *shared leadership* approach. As stated by a CSSS community organizer: 'Different leadership styles can combine and intertwine... On the one hand, there is leadership in connection with *the model*, which has its own objectives, its philosophy and approach. Compliance with it is a requirement [and NN's] leadership in this regard has been important. On the other hand, each of us has our own idea of what this model means and entails. Through several meetings, partners ironed out a common vision. On the whole, this *shared leadership* provided by members of the Board of Directors [...], contributed to a collective, locally relevant response.' Along

similar lines, a Child-protection manager stated: 'We mapped out a common vision [for the network]. Thus, the initiative is a good example of *shared leadership* between all partners; from the strategic to the intervention levels, all decisions are taken by mutual agreement.'

Issues related to leadership seem to be less important in *Norway*, at least regarding the OSK teams. Again, this could be attributed to properties of the networks under study. By and large, the legitimacy and mandate of the OSK team is rooted in political decisions, as they are composed by managers from different public agencies meeting on an equal footing. Formal leadership is problematic, as no one would have formal authority over the other. Nonetheless, there are differences between the teams, which presumably relate to the establishment of informal leadership roles. Action teams also lack formal leaders, but here we can clearly see the importance of someone 'taking the lead' and showing the enthusiasm to maintain and further develop the network.

## **REGULATORY PROVISIONS AND CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION DYNAMICS: A SYNTHESIS**

Establishing the particular, direct effects regulatory provisions may have on network dynamics is inherently challenging, but a number of interpretive inferences (i.e. third-order analysis) can be made from the evidence presented in previous sections. Besides, the analysis appears informative in that it allows for an appreciation of CWP collaborative dynamics within a specific regulatory environment and set of network schemes, as well as comparatively.

### **Collaborative configurations and steering**

As stated above, in both Quebec and Norway, collaborative endeavours have increasingly been promoted through government mandates embedded in distinct regulatory contexts; however, such mandates are defined differently in each jurisdiction, thereby variously affecting the direction and shape of network schemes (Breimo et al., 2016).

In the case of Quebec, local public agencies (i.e. the CSSS) were entrusted with a key orchestrating role; yet, ministerial directives on how to implement networks were left relatively open and tied to agencies' local realities and priorities (as enshrined in the so-called *clinical* projects). No doubt, the broad and imprecise nature of government mandates allowed for a degree of latitude for how service providers would interact with one another. As a result, many of the collaborative schemes that ensued following recent social service reforms –including the ones reviewed in this study– often adopted a *hybrid character*, articulating both government (vertical) requirements with stakeholders' (horizontal) inventiveness and compromise.

Regarding Norway, the mandates established for the OSK- and Action teams were very precise with respect to composition and set-up, whereas objectives were more vaguely stated or even implicit in some respects. Services for children and young people at risk have long been criticized for being poorly coordinated; accordingly, there is an implicit expectation that collaboration, and the sharing of resources and expertise, will improve them and make better use of available service means. The fact that these goals may be seen as somewhat in opposition to one another, i.e. improving services and at the same time saving money, has created a ground for varying collaborative dynamics, especially as all parties are accountable to their respective principals.

Also in Quebec, rules and norms jointly decided by members for steering network operation seem quite prevalent, a feature that characterizes all of the collaboratives investigated. Whenever needed, newly created interdisciplinary teams were co-located within community organizations, as opposed to being lodged in a public one. Furthermore, in several cases gradual, incremental changes contributed to altering network management, again rendering them more consensual and non-hierarchical. All of these traits could be seen as stakeholders' strategies geared at fostering and strengthening collaboration; however, by default, they can also be



associated with how mandates were established (i.e. their open-ended nature), as indicated above.

Although reconfiguring local service architectures was envisioned in Quebec reforms advocating cross-agency networks, in practice this mostly concerned the merging of public facilities into large umbrella organizations (i.e. structural integration by way of the CSSS), and less so, stakeholder interaction (i.e. *interagency collaboration*). As mentioned above, local stakeholders were entrusted by law with 'the exercise of a population-based responsibility'; yet by and large, this meant strengthening cross-agency ties, pulling resources together and improving service capacity within a catchment area. In addition, CWP two-stream organization, thus splitting welfare support from Child-protection services, was left intact. In such a context, the cross-agency collaboratives most likely to emerge were small-scale ones that fit in (or at least did not challenge) existing service configuration, such as the initiatives reviewed in this study. Moreover, finding a niche between service streams could be seen as a pragmatic organizational strategy intended to garner support from relevant stakeholders, particularly government agencies.

In Norway, the networks in question were politically defined, and sealed by means of a formal, administrative agreement. Unlike in Quebec, collaborative schemes were conceptualized, formulated and processed in a prescriptive manner by others than those actually participating in them. With service delivery being decentralized to four districts, networks were established in each one, which vary according to human resources, collaboration history and the actual challenges faced on the ground. Hence, both OSK- and Action teams were given considerable leeway in how to accomplish their respective set of objectives, including a scheme's design and operating mode, which differed across districts, despite mandates and regulatory provisions being the same.

### **Finding adequate resources to carry out the mandate**

In Norway, as in Quebec, virtually no specific provisions were made to sustain service networks – financially and otherwise – thereby creating significant barriers to their setting up and sustainability over time. Likewise, although one of government's intrinsic goals for promoting networks in either context was making effective use of scarce resources and generating economies of scale, such expectations appear to have had little impact on how the reviewed collaboratives operate.

In the case of Quebec, securing sufficient funding represented in all cases a significant burden, and a source of concern for network continuity. Consequently, various creative strategies had to be sought, namely seeking assistance from multiple government programmes, fund-raising or private donations. Likewise, the sharing and reassignment of existing staff for the purpose of running the collaborative and delivering new services was generally the norm.

Unlike in Quebec, funding did not pose a significant obstacle for either of the Norwegian collaboratives studied, at least as far as their setting up was concerned. Participants were appointed by higher authorities, and one must assume that any personnel time invested was somehow compensated. However, beyond the initial stages, operating effectively required far more resources, financial and in personnel, at least for the OSK teams. In this regard, member's unequal access to resources, including underpinning norms of fairness and equal distribution of burdens, were often a source of tensions and operative difficulties. By comparison, Action teams were normally less ridden by tensions, resulting from the fact that most service challenges they tackled required fewer resources.

### **Bridging organizational and professional cultures as prerequisites for trust**

In the context of Quebec, bridging cultural differences emerged as a major stumbling block in all of the initiatives studied. The challenge was twofold: on the one hand, to make members think critically and outside of their 'organizational boxes'; and, on the other hand, to find a common service denominator, whereby members

could collaborate effectively and in meaningful ways. Bridging this gap took time and effort, more so given fears of an organizational identity loss voiced by some. All the same, various network development activities, jointly agreed upon from the outset, appear to have provided the opportunity for members to forge common views. Interestingly, where collaboration was supported by a particular, proven intervention approach, sense making and cultural difficulties were not as critical.

In Norway, similarly to Quebec, narrowing down organizational distance and enabling participants to think beyond individual silos was a gradual and time-consuming effort. Even so, to the extent collaboration was limited to pooling resources together and finding innovative service delivery approaches, cultural differences appear to have been less of an issue. Interestingly, in the Norwegian context differences between stakeholders, especially concerning organizational expertise or ways of dealing with common problems, were often viewed as an asset rather than an obstacle for collaboration. Hence, trust was associated more with members' expected contributions than with relationship building.

In particular, formal service agreements were pivotal in Quebec for delineating service responsibilities, and in doing so, serve to frame members' expectations – including the risk of manipulations. Power asymmetries and related tensions may still be present, but were rarely mentioned or identified as a concern. Be that as it may, although all of the initiatives emerged in the context of policy-mandated networks, members were generally quite familiar with one another, many of whom had already established trustworthy relationships. And such familiarity no doubt facilitated the development of reciprocal relationships based on trust. It also contributed in forging a degree of collegiality within the network, including a sense of common purpose beyond individual agendas.

Of note regarding Norway, deliberations were always at the same time negotiations, at least for the OSK teams. For instance, reflecting openly on possible solutions to a problem invariably involved using resources from a given member,

thereby introducing resource allocation considerations. In that sense, while collaboration would, in principle, have tangible collective benefits, unequal bargaining powers would require a degree of reciprocity and trust between parties. In most cases, mutual trust developed gradually although, to varying degrees, was conditional on the degree to which collaboration was experienced as useful. In a couple of the OSK teams considered, relations were still quite instrumental, but for most others trust seemed a well-established feature.

### **Leadership principles, legitimacy and the assigning of decision-making**

Flexibility in the way government regulation envisioned collaboration in Quebec also allowed for negotiation and compromise on how schemes, once set up, would be managed and operated. As stated above, a distinctive facilitative feature of collaboratives singled out by respondents was the shared leadership approach convened among relevant stakeholders. All the same, leadership from one or a few individuals was an equally important dimension. In this regard, several initiatives were championed or led by clinician-managers who could build on their field experience, but also convey a greater sense of legitimacy to the network.

By contrast, all the networks studied in Norway consisted of collegiate units formally associating a set of 'equal' partners. To the extent leadership played a role, it should be understood in relation to the informal positions adopted by members showing a degree of enthusiasm or greater abilities in facilitating dialogue. Such informal leadership, however, was instrumental in fostering an appropriate collaborative climate within schemes.

### **Stakeholder involvement and participation motives**

Despite mandates and the pivotal role of government agencies, in Quebec stakeholder participation in collaborative arrangements is largely voluntary, their inclusion being premised on the basis of service relevance, proximity and management disposition. In this sense, engaging in a collaborative, such as the ones considered, was linked less on compliance or opportunism than on altruistic reasons; i.e.

stakeholders' eagerness to work with one another for the purpose of tackling common and sometimes intractable service delivery problems. Gaining visibility to secure public funding, or symbolic reasons to participate cannot be dismissed altogether, but were either concealed or considered to be of minor importance by respondents.

In the case of Norway, collaborative arrangements such as the OSK teams were politically and hierarchically established concerning shape and composition. Action teams' membership was also mandated; however, a wider range of agencies than required was usually incorporated into them, including non-profits. In addition, Action teams had comparatively more operating leeway, and most members appeared quite eager to participate. Accordingly, whereas Action team members regarded the scheme as a great collaborative opportunity, OSK team ones participated with some reluctance, particularly so in the beginning, owing to the stricter mandate underpinning them.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, an analysis of collaborative initiatives in Quebec and Norway reveals the extent to which various dimensions – or variable constructs – adversely or favourably affect network development and operation on the ground. Significantly, while focusing on explicit associations between regulatory mandates and jurisdiction-specific collaborative dynamics in CWP, study findings point to a number of valuable lessons for network organizing, both from a practical and policy-making standpoint. One relevant issue relates to whether a bundle of *common properties* would act as prerequisites for cross-agency schemes to operate in a successful, sustainable manner. Indeed, implicit in much of the literature on the subject is the search for such *generic, enabling qualities* – work that we partially drew on for the purpose set out in this study (Thomson and Perry, 2006; O'Toole, 2015). Nonetheless, as shown in our analysis, most facilitating or constraining features that bear on collaboratives' functioning not only tend to interact with one another, but their relative importance may vary greatly.

In this respect, schemes' *scope and scale of objectives* appear to be key mediating factors in understanding how features impact on collaborative endeavours. For example, bridging professional and inter-agency cultural differences –often singled out as an obstacle for working collaboratively toward a common goal – may be most critical for the co-creation of new services, and when different professions, informed by a common intervention philosophy, are to work closely together as a team. As seen above, most Quebec respondents involved in this type of collaborative singled out organizational cultural distance as a significant barrier. On the other hand, in Norway, despite prejudices that OSK- and Action teams members might hold about one another schemes, operating conditions and goals contributed in making such differences less consequential. A similar argument could be made regarding the weight of trust-based relations and reciprocity, seen by many as a collaborative's cornerstone; yet, as Willem and Lucidarme (2014) emphasize, this is also a difficult quality to bring about in a public sector environment, more so when networks are hierarchically defined. In this respect, whether in Quebec or Norway, trust was a valued ingredient cultivated by members as networks were set up. In Norway, however, low levels of trust between municipal actors and other state agencies persisted (in OSK teams in particular) past the scheme's creation, a feature that – *ceteris paribus* – did not prevent the collaborative from operating and performing according to its designated goals. It was the underlying complementarity, i.e. that individual agency objectives could be better served through collective efforts, that made participants engage in networks, regardless of the degree of mutual trust. This would have hardly been possible in the case of collaboratives investigated in Quebec, where infusing a sense of mutuality between providers, and having members willingly forego their own interests at the expense of goals established in the collaborative were viewed as a requirement. Our findings are in line with Provan and Lemaire (2008), who argue that some collaboratives may succeed despite trust not being widely distributed, and occurring differentially between specific member cliques. Moreover, cross-agency trust appears as a quality that demands regular and continued interaction to be forged, as reported in

several of the Quebec initiatives reviewed, and that may fluctuate depending on the issues tackled and circumstances, which seems to happen in the Norwegian schemes.

In addition, regulatory provisions interact with collaborative capacity in various ways, which may or may not align with schemes' scope and related architectures. In this regard, despite regulation's paramountcy in shaping collaborative endeavor, mandates might be indiscriminate or too blunt to accommodate, and sometimes compensate for, pre-existing stakeholders' histories and local disparities. By and large, it is the open-ended and vaguely defined nature of mandates that allowed Quebec collaboratives to emerge in a hybrid manner, thus articulating vertically defined provisions with horizontally negotiated features (as postulated by Ferlie et al., 2009). There is legitimate room for argument as to whether these collaboratives would have emerged in *spite of mandates* or, to the contrary, whether mandates provided the needed impetus for agencies to join efforts in an innovative, formalized fashion. When looking at collaboratives from a Norwegian perspective, however, it is clear that were it not for government mandates, neither of the local cross-agency schemes would have taken shape, particularly so given the administrative and resource allocation changes they required, regardless of whether set goals can be effectively fulfilled.

Significantly, depending on context, mandates and existing collaborative capacity can be thought of as *mutually dependent*, if not reinforcing each other. Again, in the case of Quebec, several schemes reviewed emerged as a result of mandates entrusted to a government local provider (the CSSS); yet, familiarity between local agencies and professionals often provided the foundation on which to build the planned scheme. A similar dynamic is reported by Popp et al. (2014), who elaborate on the interface between pre-existing stakeholder relations and mandates. In Norway, compartmentalization among administrative units contributed in making interaction less optimal; therefore, mandates could not be supported by similar conditions.

In sum, paying attention to a set core of properties, such as the ones identified in our empirical data on CWP networks in Norway and Quebec, is a necessary step towards enhancing our understanding of collaborative dynamics and functioning. Yet properties in and by themselves – as significant as they may be – are insufficient means for improving cross-organization collaboratives. More importantly, ‘common denominators’ for successful collaboration appear elusive, and in many respects are dependent on the adequate interplay between relevant factors in a given regulatory environment. Overall then, what practice needs is research less concerned with a one-size-fits-all set of properties, than with how best to calibrate the alignment of regulatory provisions, network configuration (i.e. objectives and architectures) and stakeholder dynamics on the ground.



## ENDNOTES

1. The paper draws on a broader undertaking aimed at examining CWP networks' normative rationales, collaborative incentives and barriers, as well as front-line workers' practices in three jurisdictions: Norway, Quebec and Germany.
2. While using a generic definition of networks, our study is consistent with the idea that CWP interagency joint-work can manifest itself in different forms and contexts – in a continuum from less to more formalized and comprehensive organizational relations – to help fulfil a range of functions, and involving a varied mix of stakeholders and professionals (Popp et al., 2014; Klijn, 2008). Accordingly, a diversity of formalized schemes, differently named in each jurisdiction (e.g. teams, networks, collaboratives), were investigated in this study.
3. Names of local initiatives have been concealed for confidentiality reasons.
4. The different 'orders of analysis' used in meta-ethnography draw on Schutz's (1967) notion of first-, second- and third-order constructs. First-order refers to findings reported in the original studies; second-order alludes to a reinterpretation of findings as data is reconsidered and study meanings translated into one-another; whereas third-order points to further inferences and the overall synthesis.
5. Both these references are widely cited, and provide a thorough inventory of variables understood to affect networks' operation. The analytical grid was defined (deductively) based on these references, and subsequently refined (inductively) as cross-study coding proceeded.

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